

Around the Washington region, developers are looking up — and many don't seem to mind

By [Steven Overly](#)

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The skyline around the Washington region is poised to soar higher in the coming years as an increasing number of construction projects bring ever-taller buildings to neighborhoods and commercial centers from North Bethesda to Rosslyn to the District.

But while these buildings are sure to alter the skyline, they also signify a more fundamental shift in the way people live life on the ground.

“We had an Ozzie and Harriet development pattern in this country for many years,” said Tom Murphy, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute. “Is that a sustainable model? Can you expect people to drive an hour and a half or two hours one-way to get to work?”

The short answer: No.

Two of the country's largest demographics by age — millennials and their baby boomer parents — are flocking to densely developed communities where they can live and work within steps of supermarkets, recreational centers and restaurants.

They want to carry groceries by hand, not load them into trunks. They want to bike or bus to work, not guzzle gasoline. And they want to head out to lunch with colleagues, not just brown bag at a cafeteria table.

It's a change in lifestyle and a break from decades of suburban sprawl that real estate experts contend has forced some local developers and governments to build up rather than out. Some examples:

A staggering [390-foot building from Monday Properties](#) is already under construction in Rosslyn and will be the tallest office building in the Washington region when the dust settles.

RTC Partnership LLC has [plans to replace an existing building along Reston Parkway](#) with a 23-story mixed-use project that will be the tallest building in Reston Town Center.

A development project above the railroad tracks behind Union Station promises to stretch the city's 130-foot height limit on buildings. [The Akridge project](#) will sit atop a 27-foot-tall platform over the tracks, bringing its total height to almost 160 feet.

Residents on the 25th floor of a planned [apartment complex in Tysons Corner](#) should have a sweeping and largely unobstructed view of Northern Virginia when the Greystar project is finished.

Vornado has [submitted plans to construct a 23-story office tower](#) at what is now 1851 South Bell St. If approved, it would be the tallest building in Crystal City.

The catalyst to all of these projects is mass transit. Each proposed building is located within a reasonable walk of either an existing Metro station or the forthcoming Silver Line, which will extend Metrorail to Dulles International Airport.

“If I were the dictator in the region I would say within the D.C. area, I would keep the height level [restrictions] because you’ve created a character and quality of life that I think you would lose if you go higher,” Murphy said. “But as you get out [of the city], there I think transit-oriented development trumps height requirements.”

The proximity of these tall buildings to mass transit does more than just mitigate congestion on local roadways. It’s also part of a bargain with future occupants who will be charged higher rents to offset increased construction costs.

“Demand is so robust that the market is willing to pay the increased cost of that construction by spending more on a price per square foot for rent or for sale if it’s a housing project,” said Chris Leinberger, a Brookings Institution fellow and advocate for walkable communities.

The Arlington example

Arlington County embraced height earlier than most, starting in the 1960s with a plan to convert Rosslyn into an urban hub, said Terry Holzheimer, director of Arlington Economic Development.

It’s now home to several of the tallest buildings in the region, many located near the Pentagon City and Crystal City Metro stops, or along the string of stations that extend from Rosslyn to Ballston.

Height, Holzheimer said, was inevitable. The county aimed to concentrate much of the commercial and high-rise residential projects within a quarter-mile of a Metro station, beyond which the area became neighborhoods of single-family homes.

“The closer you are to the Metro station, the more value the property has,” he said. “If you get more density closer to the Metro stations, you effectively have more economic value.”

The county’s approach to growth has made a stroll down Wilson Boulevard the picture of walkable, urban development. Streets are lined with bars, restaurants and merchants. There are shopping malls and performing arts venues. It’s all accessible on foot or mass transit.

As a result, nearly half of the households in Arlington County are made up of “Metro renters,” a label coined by Esri, a firm that tracks consumer spending and lifestyle habits. These 20- and 30-something professionals tend to live in high-rise buildings, listen to public radio, work out at gyms, throw Frisbees and go out dancing, according to Esri data.

Holzheimer said these young urbanites also keep the local economy humming. The mix of high-rise office and residential buildings near Metro stations is designed to keep a balanced ratio between those who work and live in the area.

“If you think about a restaurant and what it might take [to thrive], you’re going to want people during the day to have a lunch crowd and you’re going to want people at night for a dinner crowd,” he said.

The influx of people to densely developed communities has been largely characterized as a “back-to-the-city movement,” but in actuality most of the local redevelopment projects lie in surrounding suburbs, said Leinberger, who also serves as president of Locus, an advocacy group of real estate developers and investors.

“It’s even more a transformation of the suburb,” he said. “That’s why Arlington is so important. They’ve taken it further than any suburban jurisdiction in the country.”

White Flint’s future

North Bethesda has its own plans to convert a broad swath of land along Rockville Pike into a pedestrian-friendly community stocked with restaurants, retail outlets, office space and high-rise dwellings.

Lerner Enterprises and the Tower Cos. [unveiled sketches last week for the 45-acre site](#) that White Flint Mall currently occupies. The still-evolving plans are slated to include 2.1 million square feet of new development — more than double the existing amount.

Meanwhile, Montgomery County’s tallest building to date will be erected across the street. JBG Cos. and MacFarlane Partners [are slated to construct North Bethesda Market II](#), which as proposed will include a nearly 300-foot-tall residential complex, a movie theater and an office building.

Washington “is reaching a situation where suburban sprawl is no longer viable,” said Greg Trimmer, a principal at JBG. “The reason for that is they have found that the taxes paid by sprawl don’t pay for the infrastructure necessary to get out that far.”

Trimmer added that demand for walkable communities and a shift in consumer habits has helped to unravel the mentality that density automatically equates to more traffic.

“We have started to see a big sea change in terms of the public’s reaction to height,” Trimmer said. “They fought height for a long time and what they got isn’t necessarily what they wanted.”

Daniel Hoffman serves as president of the Randolph Civic Association, a group comprised of 1,430 households that sit a short distance from JBG's project. Despite potential impact on the clogged artery that is Rockville Pike, Hoffman said a majority of residents are bullish about the redevelopment.

"We're understanding of the fact that this is going to happen," Hoffman said. "We want new amenities. We want new tax revenue for the county to provide things like libraries and schools. So we're all for it."

That sentiment holds true even if the skyline includes a few new towers, he said — just as long as they aren't built immediately next door.

"When [residents] realize what's coming and that it's going to make their community more of a community, they warm up to it," Hoffman said.

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Steven Overly anchored and edited The Washington Post's Innovations blog. He left The Post in May 2017. [Follow](#) 

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